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Building An Effective Executive Leadership Onboarding Program

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Authored by

Dennis C. Miller, CEO of [DCM Associates, Inc.](#)

Most nonprofit executive leaders and board members recognize the importance of developing an effective onboarding plan for new CEOs and other C-Suite executives but implementing effective onboarding can seem daunting to most. According to a recent survey, almost 50% of new CEOs reported getting little or no support from their boards after starting the new job.

As an association dedicated to nonprofit search, the Network for Nonprofit Search Consultants (NNSC) believes effective onboarding of new executive leaders is vital. In addition to investments that many organizations make in recruiting new CEOs and other C-Suite executive leaders, planning for your new executive's transition and early tenure creates lasting results.

A positive onboarding process will maximize the return on investment, getting the most out of the resources and time your organization committed to the search and hiring process.

Onboarding refers to preparing the new CEO to adjust to the social, cultural and professional components of their new role. The greater the investment of your board's time in the executive's onboarding process, the quicker your new CEO will be leading your organization successfully into the future. Research has affirmed repeatedly that effective onboarding programs create significant results in executive leadership retention.

A few years ago, an article from the *Stanford Social Information Review* highlighted the importance of onboarding for new CEOs in the nonprofit sector. The article pointed out that many nonprofit chief executives are in the CEO position for the first time and, after

experiencing an enjoyable honeymoon period, they can have a significant drop in job satisfaction and contentment in working with their board.

The article went on to state that approximately one-third of all new nonprofit CEOs follow a leader who was fired or forced out, suggesting that nonprofit boards and executives are frequently out of sync when it comes to performance expectations.

Overarching Themes

More executives succeed or fail in new roles based on the strength and effectiveness of their key relationships with the board chair and other board leaders, members of the leadership team and key external stakeholders. It is crucial for the new CEO to know how to best navigate the organization's culture to develop trust and respect and establish their credibility early on in their tenure.

The new CEO needs to take responsibility in the onboarding process as well. Both the CEO and board chair should spend time together, collectively setting the organization's agenda for the future and determining how the board and CEO will best make decisions collectively as partners in leadership.

Relationships. It is crucial for your new CEO to know what internal and external relationships are most important to meet and get to know early on in their tenure. Guide them on who you think their priorities should be in developing these relationships and share both helpful background and political landmines. Relationship building is key to success.

- Actively help the new CEO build key relationships with all employees, board members and volunteers through positive early introductions.
- Make sure your Director of Communications develops a press release announcing the appointment of the new CEO.
- Ensure the new CEO knows who the key external stakeholders are, such as elected and appointed officials, major donors, etc. and have the board chair and CEO decide how best to introduce the new CEO to these vital constituents.
- Encourage the new CEO to devote ample time early in their tenure to "manage by walking around" all locations of your organization, day and evenings as well as weekends.

Culture. Studies from leading research organizations reveal that more leaders fail because they fail to successfully navigate culture.

“Organizational culture and politics, not lack of competence or managerial skill, were the primary reasons for failure.”

Harvard Business Review

- Make sure that the new CEO is able to meet with both internal and external stakeholders to share their vision for the organization and the values that will guide their decision making in the days and months ahead. They may share stories about their personal life and career so others can get to know who they really are and that they care deeply about them.
- Leading organizations today seek CEOs who enhance their culture and work to ensure new viewpoints and life experiences are valued. Seeking individuals who “fit” existing cultures typically prevents or erodes inclusion and belonging.
- Share what others should know about the CEO’s plans to build upon the organization’s culture of success and ask others what is important to them. Their inputs will be revealing.

Skills and Competencies. Most CEOs, regardless of their past achievements and success, need to learn and develop new leadership competencies as they grow in their roles. Today, boards are seeking new CEOs with the following competencies:

- Visionary thinking
 - Emotional intelligence
 - Collaboration
 - Brand builder
 - Entrepreneurial spirit
 - Motivational and inspirational
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- The board chair should clarify expectations and outline what success looks like after 30 days, 90 days, six months and a year for the new CEO and how they can expect to be evaluated.
 - If an annual performance evaluation form exists, share with your new CEO up front.

In addition to the above, consider the following as you design your onboarding process for your new chief executive:

- How does the board expect the new CEO to communicate with them?
- How often does the board chair want to meet or speak with the new CEO?
- What are the key strategic issues facing the CEO on day one?

- What are the most pressing issues to add to the CEO's calendar for the first few weeks?
- Are there any performance improvement issues for members of the senior team that the new CEO needs to know about?
- What does the CEO need from the board and their leadership team to ensure a smooth transition?
- What measures or milestones will the board and the new CEO need to agree on for the first year? Year two?

From personal experiences, it is remarkable how many nonprofit boards do not provide an annual performance evaluation of their chief executive. Linking the new chief executive's development and performance to your organization's strategic goals and the social impact it wants to achieve will dramatically increase the odds of your new CEO succeeding.

Onboarding will help ensure that your organization benefits from the new CEO's expertise, experience and knowledge for many years to come.

Dennis C. Miller is a nationally recognized strategic leadership coach and executive search consultant with more than thirty-five years of experience working with nonprofit board leadership and chief executives across the country. Dennis is also an expert in board governance, leadership development, philanthropy and succession planning. In addition, he is a sought-after motivational speaker, retreat facilitator and leadership performance coach.

The **Network of Nonprofit Search Consultants (NNSC)** is a professional organization comprised of some of the leading nonprofit search consultants in the United States and Canada. NNSC provides a forum for executive search consultants to discuss best practices in the field of retained search services predominantly for nonprofit organizations and non-governmental organizations. Our mission is to reflect the goals of the nonprofit organizations we serve, as well as ensure that the best leadership is in place to meet the needs of a strong, vibrant nonprofit sector. For more information about NNSC or to find a search consultant to assist you, visit www.nnsc.org.